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ABSTRACT

As the strongest, most cohesive, and most viable societal unit, the African family has a great impact on literacy and reading. Many different types of family structure exist in Africa, and individuals frequently feel a strong sense of responsbility for the children of their servants and for members of their age, ethnic, religious, and social groups. Children are considered a valuable family resource, with male children regarded as a special asset (although females are regarded highly among the few matrilineal groups); elders are held in high esteem; and money is scarce. Parents' attitudes toward reading and education are highly positive. Among the resources that bring the language of literacy into the home are fathers, other adult models, siblings, and the radio. In cases where a family can afford to send only some children to school, those who attend school can bring limited functional literacy to adults in the extended family. Age groups have contributed greatly to educational development. Inequities exist among ethnic groups, due to the rejection by some groups of the language of literacy. (Two stories are included: one showing how a school girl has transmitted medical and agricultural information to adults in her village, and another written by a school boy about his first day at school.) (GW)

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# OPPORTUNITIES TO USE FAMILY RESOURCE FOR READING IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES OF AFRICA

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Presented at the

SEVENTH WORLD CONGRESS ON READING

HAMBURG, GERMANY

AUGUST 2, 1978

BY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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Mr. Chairman (or as we say in Igbo-land, Maazi Onye Isi ocha), fellow reading teachers, distinguished representative to this Seventh World Congress on Reading. Ladies and Gentlemen: It is with a great deal of pleasure that I come before you today to share with you some of my thoughts on how reading can be promoted in the African family. I have lived for nearly three years in Eastern Nigeria and do not pretend to be knowledgeable about life elsewhere on the vast continent of Africa. My research and personal contacts, have, however, supported the generalizations I have made. I humbly appreciate the confidence placed in me by the International Reading Association who invited me to address this august group.

"The family is by far the most important primary group in society. In fact, of all human organizations none transcends the family in the intensity of sociological significance".[1] An Igbo, himself, the writer makes this observation of his own Eastern Nigerian group. Casual observers and scholars alike agree unequivocally that the family is the strongest, most cohesive, and viable societal unit in the African context. It's influence is, therefore, felt in every human endeavour, whether political, educational, religious or economic. That its impact upon literacy and reading be given serious examination is both judicious and expedient.

## READING AS LITERACY

It is the opinion of this writer that "literacy" and "reading" do not and should not convey the same meaning. Literacy equips the individual with certain skills which enable him to derive meaning from any printed materials which he may encounter in his day-to-day activities. Reading is an all-encompassing concept, for

it embodies not only the possession of literacy skills but also the constant use of them for the purpose of acquiring information, and for enjoyment. Literacy is a skeleton upon which the flesh of reading rests. Today in the developing countries of Africa, reading is considered one of the three literacy skills, the second being writing, and numeracy, the third. For most Africans reading is meant to be functional, a means to a practical end --- earning money and moving up the socio-economic ladder. I tend to believe that this attitude is directly related to the level of development; education must aim at producing something or helping the particular country to rise quickly to prominence in the family of nations. Most African nations cannot yet afford the luxury of education for education's sake. Therefore, it is for the purpose of this paper that I must abandon my own idea about what reading is and use the terms "literacy" and "reading" inter-changeably.

## THE CONCEPT OF "FAMILY" IN AFRICA

### The Extended Family

"The fact is that most Africans take a broader view of family relationship and responsibility than most Westerners".[2] The etuka or extended family of the Ngombe of the Northwestern part of the Republic of the Congo may consist of two, three, or four segments, each composed of three to eight adult males with their children and their sisters. Or it may include only the families of siblings (male and female), or the families of the sons of siblings, the patrilocal organization.[3]

The polygamous family of the polygenous type, is a structure which includes a man and two or more wives and their children. They are also predominantly patrilineal and patrilocal with males enjoying

authority and inheritance as well. Pockets of matrilineal groups are found in various locations on the Continent but are weakening and being overtaken by the World-wide phenomenon of male domination. The Sagara of Tanzania, the Congo of Zaire, the Ashanti of Ghana, the Bemba of Zambia, the Chewa of Malawi, and the Chaffia of Nigeria are examples of matrilineal system which are still in existence.[4]

Another family structure may consist of several households in which live the head of the family, his wife or wives and their unmarried sons and daughters. The husbands and children of married daughters may be an integral part of matrilocal families such as occurs among the Chaffia, the only matrilineal and matrilocal Nigerian people.[5] Among matrilineal groups the husband joins the family of the wife. Inheritance, as well, passes through the female members.

An extended family may embrace relations, both close and distant, who have been gathered under the guardianship of one male who, by virtue of his economic circumstances has accepted full responsibility for their welfare, upbringing and training. His own wife or wives and children are completely integrated into the larger family community. It is often not possible for an observer to distinguish between the biological offsprings of the "master" and the other relations.

The monogamous nuclear family of the Western type is gaining acceptance in some African societies, especially where Christianity has triumphed over tradition and where increased educational opportunities are making each new generation less and less dependent upon the previous one.

Ever present in most African households are those individuals whose presence is meant solely for the purpose of rendering service to members of the family circle. These "servants" may indeed be some of the relations who exchange their services for the protection and training accorded them by the head of the family, the young child of a deceased aged father whose last young wife is still producing children, or perhaps the child of a former age mate who has met with misfortune. Regardless of their individual responsibilities, all may be called upon, as they frequently are, to minister to the needs of the head of the household. Whether the "master" (or "mistress", as the case may be) is African or non-African, servants tend to identify with the family/lies they serve with the master reciprocating. They may grow up, marry, and themselves begin to produce children, all while in the service of the same master.

It is not uncommon for the master to become involved with the education of the children of his servants. This involvement may range from actually paying the school fees to simply intervening with school authorities on behalf of the children. In a sense, the master accepts the children of his servants as his personal responsibility.

Age Groups

Age grades, age sets and generation sets constitute other important societal groups which differ from the nuclear or extended family only in their filial ties. Membership is associated with chronological age, the age of circumcision, or descent and kinship. The ties that bind these individual groups together are, in certain respects, more capable of surviving perilous dividing influences than familial ties. Quoting Kenyatta, one writer says of one Kikuyu sub-set,

Kikuyu sub-set,

> "Men circumcised at the same time stand in the very closest relationship to each other. When a man of the same age group injures another it is a serious magicoreligious offence. They are like blood brothers; they must not do any wrong to each other. It ranks with an injury done to a member of one's own family".[6]

The group may function as a social, economic or political institution and may, for a defined purpose, join other age groups until the mission or task is accomplished. More will be said about the nature of some of the activities of the age groups. For the moment, suffice it to say that, depending upon their constituency and leadership, they are capable of being powerful agents for change and for improving educational opportunities.

Ethnic Groups

Ethnocentrism is a quality that generally conveys a pejorative idea. Yet it is a quality that is so much a facet of the African character that most will work untiringly to accomplish anything that will make their own ethnic group appear to be superior to another. Good as well as evil forces can take advantage of this human frailty. One of the areas that can and does benefit from it is education, as will be noted later.

Other Social Groups

Religious groups, especially those patterned after modern secular establishments, social and political community organizations, and professional and trade unions are making their collective influence felt in many quarters. On certain sensitive issues, they may speak out with the fervor of a family whose very survival is at stake so closely do they identify with each other. Shorter says in African Culture and the Christian Church that in Africa, "what matters are the social relationships not the blood or affinal relationships on which they are based".[7]

Clearly, then, in Africa, "family" is an idea rather than a fixed entity. A scholarly observer of East Africa opines, "It would be unrealistic and quite presumptuous to predict the dissolution of the family community ... "[8] Personal observation leads one to conclude that there is little reason to believe that the Western concept of "family" will overshadow or uproot the African family tradition in the near future, if ever.

## FAMILY RESOURCES

### Children

On a continent where offsprings are considered a married couple's most cherished possessions, children must be considered a valuable family resource. Most African women begin producing children as soon as they are married and may continue doing so throughout their productive years. People in all classes prize the large family for its social and educative value. The implications for a polygamous family are obvious. This writer was personally acquainted with a chief who, at the time of his death, had three wives and twenty-three children. Even though large families are the rule rather than the exception, few, even chiefs, have the means with which to educate all of their children. Hence, some are chosen to go to school while the others remain at home to wait for the later assistance of the more fortunate ones. In many cases, help is sought from outsiders or other family members.

### Males

Male children are regarded as a special asset to most families, their importance being exemplified in a number of practices. In Nigerian Igbo culture, a woman who during her productive years, fails to produce a male child can prevent one of her daughters (probably the eldest) from marrying until she produces one or more male children

for her parents. As soon as a Kikuyu (Kenya) child is born, the mother emits five screams if it is a boy and four if it is a girl.[9] Most African societies are patrilineal and patrilocal. Females have no rights of inheritance. In fact, in some cultures they are considered no longer a part of their parents' family, once they marry, but become a part of the husbands' families. In many African societies, only males are permitted to go to school. In Benin (formerly Dahomey) "More boys than girls are educated, and in some families one boy in two is educated".[10] Lloyd also noted that poor Moslems among the Yoruba (Nigeria) still "have doubts about sending girls to school".[11] This practice receives support from many females and many more males. A young woman, a personal acquaintance of mine, is an example. Although she is not literate, her literate husband is paying school fees for his two sisters. As the wife observed the two girls in a tutorial session with several other girls, she commented that her sisters-in-law were being "corrupted" by the other girls. A young Nigerian male student wrote on a topic of his own choice that girls shouldn't receive education that is equal to that of boys because they will be troublesome and begin to think that they are equal to their husbands.

In the developing countries of Africa, from various indices of literacy emerge statistics of as low as 18 per cent to as high as 50 per cent. The great majority of the illiterate population is female. Needless to say, African male adults and children constitute a resource that cannot be overlooked for improving education.

Females

Among the few matrilineal groups, female authority must be reckoned with. When in conversation with a member of one of these groups, one is never left in doubt about the high regard in which

females are held. One researcher writes, "These people are open about their strong bias towards their mothers and mothers' own kin group".[12] In a conversation with a male student of mine, he whispered, almost reverently, "We think so much of our women and girls".[13] I later learned that he is an Chaffia.

Elders

Elders are held in high esteem in African societies. In fact, most decisions about serious matters affecting the larger community are made by them with little or no opposition from younger members. Grandparents, too, play an important role in the lives of children who spend a greater part of their early years with them. Through this association children learn the folklore, the religious beliefs, and the social values and practices of the group.

Money

Finally, the resource that is in short supply for most African families is that of money. Although the majority of Africans are poor by most standards, parents are prepared to spend as much on their children's education as their financial means permit, for they see education as the main channel of social and economic mobility.

In developing Africa, the rate of illiteracy is high, most families are large and poor, and neglect of the education of females is widespread. Positive influences for promoting literacy and reading are not readily discernible. But a closer look from the inside reveals that the African family's resources are unique and diversified, and if mobilised have great potential for bringing reading to all.

## FAMILY READING FOR NUTRITION AND HEALTH

Chioma ran home from school waving a leaf of paper in the air. It was a notice given to all of the children informing them of the visit to their school by some health officers who the following day were coming to administer the anti-measles vaccine to all pre-school children. In every corner of Chioma's compound were small babies, some of whom were Chioma's sisters and brothers. "Go and visit the huts of your other mothers, Chioma. Read the notice to them very slowly and carefully so that they do not fail to take your sisters and brothers to have them protected." Chioma's mother was a teacher and she knew how important it was to have children inoculated against the disease that had claimed the lives of far too many children in their village. Chioma's mother planned to visit later to make it clear to her mates that their baby nurses should be given the same protection since many of them were not yet of school age. Besides, now that primary education was free, they, too would go to school in a few years.

The first child of her father, Chioma was happy to be the one who could read the newspapers to her other mothers as well as tell them how much medicine to give their babies and when to give it to them. Even though she was a girl it was Chioma who had helped her village to produce more yams than any other in the entire division. Each day, after school, she had gone from compound to compound reading for the farmers of her extended family the directions on how to use the bags of free fertilizer the government had given them in implementing a "Feed-the-Nation" program. She also went to the village church on Fridays which was the day their letters were delivered. While there, she helped many of her neighbours read their mail. It was a great honour for Chioma to be able to serve her elders. Chioma's father was working in a distant city. He had hoped that his first child would be a son, but now he was quite proud of his daughter who was doing so much to help his growing family.

## FAMILY RESOURCES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Since reading is the decoding of "talk written down", let us briefly examine the role of the family in the development of the most crucial of the pre-reading skills, language development.

### Attitude toward the Language of Literacy

Children who receive their initial reading instruction in the language they have learned at home have a decided advantage over those who are faced with having to learn a second language for reading. In developing Africa, second language reading is probably "the greatest barrier to the development of good reading habits".[14] A carry-over from the missionaries and the colonial days, literacy skills were taught so that the people "could absorb the lessons of the Bible".[15] On most of the Continent, the languages of literacy are either English or French and not the local languages. On the whole, parents are so highly positive in their attitude toward literacy and education in general, that Piaget's "extrinsic motivation for reading"[16] is provided for second language learning as well. There are, however, a few scattered exceptions, as will be noted later.

### Fathers

Fathers, who are usually better educated than the mothers, bring the language of literacy into the home. As the gulf in the social interrelationships between African fathers and their children narrows somewhat,[17] greater opportunities are being afforded them to profit from the verbal exchange that heretofore did not take place. Fathers, brothers, and other select educated members of the extended family now have a major role to play in bringing the language of literacy to the children at home. Since the commitment to universal primary education by all the African countries in

attendance at the UNESCO Conference at Addis Ababa in 1961,[18] economic constraints have been relaxed thus bringing children of all classes out of the compounds and into the schools. Many are attending free elementary schools with the number of girls in attendance showing a dramatic increase. Even in some male dominated societies one hears fathers making the statement that "To educate a daughter is to educate a family."

Other Adult Models

The ethnic group among whom I live are a highly verbal people. No matter the level of education, or the absence of it, a ready oration seems to be on the tip of every adult tongue. Opportunities for speech-making are not lacking in this culture, for the Igbos seize every opportunity for a social gathering during which many hours are spent in oratory.

A twelve year old Igbo girl who accompanied me to the United States attracted interviewers from a number of newspapers and radio and television stations. On two separate occasions she found herself standing before a microphone and an audience of more than one hundred people. She proved more than up to the task even though she was struggling with a language that was not her own. The influence of her adult models was clearly exemplified in her self-confidence and her ability to make herself understood in spite of her lack of fluency in English.

The same degree of verbal self-confidence is seen in children who participate in local radio and television programs, some of which are in the vernacular, others in the second language.

A child learns speech in the vernacular very early as he listens to the lullabies, stories and lessons while snuggling close to the back of mother or nurse. "At the time when the child begins to learn how to speak, care is taken by the mother to teach the child

the correct manner of speech and to acquaint him with all important names in the family, past and present."[19] When he is able to speak, he can answer questions which are asked gently and naturally. In short, he is learning language painlessly and effortlessly without knowing that he is being taught by the mother language model. Thus infant tutoring by mothers helps to develop reading readiness in the child.

Siblings

In order to relieve mothers of some of their child-rearing responsibilities so that they can attend to other duties, sister and brothers who are slightly older, (but scarcely larger) carry their younger siblings about on their backs, amusing them with the conversation, stories, and songs which they, themselves, learned in the same way. Consequently these siblings can be a major resource for pre-reading language development.

The Family Radio

In nearly every African home, no matter how modest, some member of the family has acquired a radio. Ranging from elaborate stereo, two-speaker systems to tiny one-battery sets the family's radio is the primary source of music and entertainment from the "outside". In addition many stations are using this medium to bring a variety of educational programs to the masses. Language for literacy is one of the priorities. Listening and learning songs in another language is another easy almost natural route to a second language. The family radio is an investment that will continue paying dividends by providing models for second language learning.

## FAMILY RESOURCES FOR READING

### Siblings

According to Nwagwu, "In Africa, thirty-four countries have free primary education, but it is not compulsory in most of these nations, and eighteen countries have neither free nor compulsory primary education."[20] In these nations, economic constraints mandate selectivity within large families trying to educate their children. Those who are chosen are obligated to teach basic reading to those who must wait at home. The efforts of these select members could also go a long way toward bringing limited functional literacy to adult members of the extended family.

### Original Stories in the Absence of Books

Kawuba was now in class three. He had done well in his entrance examination into secondary school. Today, his English teacher had asked the class to write about something they would always remember, an unforgettable event. Should he write about one of the wonderful stories his old grandfather used to relate as all of the children of their compound gathered around beneath the bright harmattan moon? A spell engulfed the compound as these wonderful tales of many generations unwound. Kawuba knew them so well. But, no. There was a day in his life that Kawuba would never forget, even if he lived to be as old as his grand father who lived to one hundred and one. This was his story.

### PED TROUSERS FOR KAWUBA

The August break had given way to the early September rains. Kawuba lay on his bed listening to the "kpom kpom kpom" of the rain on the zinc roof of his house. Sleep refused to come, even though darkness had descended upon the compound more than an hour ago.

The moon shared a white string that cut across Kawuba's pillow and a bit of the collar of his new school uniform which was tucked securely underneath. "I will keep this here", he has said, after his mother had pressed his shirt and trousers. "When the time comes, I shall know where it is and be ready".

Turning over on his bed, Kawuba closed his eyes. But somehow, his eyes refused to co-operate. He found himself standing at his mother's bedroom door, tapping softly to say that it was time for him to have his morning bath. Kawuba did not really want his mother to give him his morning bath any more. After all, he was a big boy, starting school. He could bathe himself: "Why is it so dark?" thought Kawuba as he heard his mother say, "Go back to your bed, Kawuba. It is not yet time to get up!".

When sleep finally came, Kawuba found himself in the school compound, playing with children he did not know. "Go away!", shouted a boy who was taller than Kawuba. "This school is for big boys and girls, not for babies like you!".

Kawuba woke up with a start, greatly relieved to find that he had been dreaming. But why hadn't his mother come to call him to prepare for school? Could she have forgotten that today was to be his first day to go school?

Carefully lifting one corner of his pillow, Kawuba checked his new uniform to be sure that the blue pants and white shirt were not becoming wrinkled. Suddenly the school pants were transformed into the beautiful red trousers his mother had promised him if he scored high marks in the first examination.

"Yes, his mother had forgotten", thought Kawuba. "I must go and wake her up". Although Kawuba had not heard the usual morning clatter of water pails, he was convinced that it was time to get up to get ready.

"Go back to your bed, Kawuba; it is not yet time to get up!", came his mother's voice from the other side of her bedroom door.

"Why was this night so much longer than all of the others?", thought Kawuba as he trudged dejectedly back to his room. He was sure he had heard the last cock-crow hours ago.

Determined not to allow himself to be late, Kawuba decided to sit on his 'oche' near the open window to wait for daybreak. With one more peek at his uniform, Kawuba settled himself on the wooden oche his father had made for him when he was a much smaller boy. He would need a new one soon, one more suitable for a big boy.

"Kukororo Okoo", crowed Kawuba's own rooster from the woodpile in back of the yam barn. Kawuba had dozed and had nearly fallen from his seat. He knew that his own rooster would not deceive him; it was time. Besides, Kawuba thought he could discern a faint glimmer of brightness in the sky beyond the ugbaka trees that lined the main road.

"Everybody must look clean and neat at school", explained Kawuba's mother as she rubbed his neck briskly with a fresh towel from the shelf.

"He looks fine", exclaimed Kawuba's father who had delayed going to work this morning so that he could see his son depart for school on his first day. "Your mother says she promised you a new pair of red trousers, Kawuba. I have given her money to buy them if you score well in your examination".

With a downward glance, Kawuba answered softly, "I shall try my best, father". He collected his blue exercise book and new white pencil his big sister had given him as a starting-school present.

Kawuba was happy with everything he saw in the school compound. He was also happy that there was no big boy to tease him. At times he went closer to the teacher so that he would not miss any part of her stories. His mother would be happy if he could repeat the stories to her when he went home.

When the examination was given, Kawuba listened intently to every instruction the teacher gave. He had learned the English alphabet with his sister's help. He even knew how to say many things in English, although he spoke and understood Igbo best. His sister had taught him how to count and his mother had often played counting games with him as he helped her assort the kola nuts which she sometimes sold. He also knew how to read and write his name.

When the marks were put up on the wall, Kawuba saw that his own name was the first on the list. There were some other words on the chart that Kawuba could not read, but he knew that "first" meant and he knew that he would be put in class 'A'. Most important of all, he knew that his mother would buy him the new red trousers.

The teacher called him to the front of the class and told the other children to clap for him.

Kawuba looked down, but he felt happy as he ran home to give his mother the good news.

When Kawuba returned home that day, his little sister Nwamaka who was in elementary Four ran to him shouting as she always did, "What do you have for me, Kawuba?" He had printed his assignment on sheets of foolscap given to him by the teacher. Kawuba handed it to Nwamaka. Excitedly she sat down on her oche to try to read her brother's story. She ran to her mother who was plaiting six-year old Chinyere's hair. "Would you like to hear Kawuba's story, mother?" Chinyere and her mother listened as Nwamaka proudly read her brother's words. "Oh, Kawuba," squealed Chinyere, "We like your story. Will you write another one for us?".

Modern African writers are indebted to their elders who through oral tradition, have provided the themes for many of their works. A true picture of African life is being projected

to the world through the proliferation of novels, poetry, and prose throughout the Continent. Even from obsure teacher training institutions come delightful stories that, if put into print would captivate children of any clime. "Red Trousers for Kawuba" is one of them.

Age Grades

The activities of age grades range from pooling their individual resources in order to send one of their members abroad to a university to laying a water pipe-line in their home community. Building of schools, and other public buildings, the construction of roads and bridges are examples of the self-help that has contributed immensely to development all over Africa. Age grades have played a major role in this work. As their plans for community development unfold in the future, attention must be given to the inclusion of libraries, so woefully under-provided at present.

Ethnic Groups

In some African countries certain inequities in educational attainment exist among the ethnic groups, inequities which are traceable to the acceptance by some, and the rejection by others, of the language of literacy. In northern Nigeria, for example, the Hausas have, on religious grounds, traditionally been skeptical about the use of the English language for basic instruction in schools. A predominantly Moslem culture, this group sees the use of the English language in schools, particularly in the early years, as the avenue leading to the exposure of their children to the "corrupting influences" of Western education.

Arabic, the preferred language of the Koran, is studied by most elementary school boys in private classes after regular school hours. At the world Confederation of Organizations of the

Teaching profession in August, 1977, Northern Nigerian teachers expressed dismay at the level of achievement in reading among their students when compared to other sections of the country and attributed it to the prevailing attitude toward the language of literacy. In nations that have no lingua franca but use a second language as the official language as well as the predominant language of learning, ethnic and religious factions would be wise to rethink their stand on the language issue in order not to deny their children every opportunity of competing favourably with their counterparts in other sections of the country. While establishing a lingua franca may be a desirable goal, "it is easier said than done".[21] A more realistic and less idealistic stand by those concerned could help to dispel the existing myth of the ethnic superiority of certain groups.

Money

Books are valued treasures in Africa. A little boy in Ghana wanted to carry my bag for money "to buy my books". On the streets of Lagos, Nigeria, children are seen selling everything from chewing sticks to chocolate, many trying to earn money to pay for books. Most of Africa is part of the Third World which contains masses of people who eke out a precarious existence on incomes of less than two hundred pounds per year. Although money is scarce, in most homes education and books rank second only to food in the order of priority needs. It is hoped that one will never have to be sacrificed for the other.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have a dream, That dream is that in the next ten years, every African child who is sixteen years of age will be not just literate, but a reader.

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